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SUBJECT: BAD GOVERNANCE HAMPERS UNICEF'S EFFORTS IN BURMA

Classified By: CDA, a.i. RON McMULLEN FOR REASON 1.5(D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: UNICEF's \$12m annual program in Burma is striving to improve child welfare in a country where 35% of children under the age of 5 are malnourished. It has achieved some laudable successes, but overall prospects are severely constrained by an inept, illegitimate, and corrupt military regime. DCM participated in a UNICEF-organized trip to normally restricted areas of Shan State January 9-12. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) UNICEF'S EFFORTS WELL-RECEIVED IN SHAN STATE: UNICEF organized a familiarization visit for diplomats to Shan State January 9-12 to coincide with National Immunization Day. The group visited schools, rural clinics, and administrative centers southeast of Taunggyi in townships normally off limits to foreigners. These rugged hill tracts are populated by non-Burman ethnic groups, particularly Shan and Pa-O, that have bridled at rule from Rangoon. The UNICEF group was everywhere warmly received by the local people, who appeared genuinely grateful for UNICEF's health and education programs.

¶3. (U) JAPANESE AID EVIDENT: The Japanese ambassador was given something of a hero's welcome, as many nurses opened nearly empty medicine cabinets in rural clinics to show essential drugs donated by Japan in conjunction with UNICEF programs. At one stop a grateful health worker pulled up on a Japanese-donated motorcycle, offering to give the Japanese ambassador a lift to the next site. At every school the group passed out Japanese pencils to students--all donated to UNICEF by Japan for this purpose.

¶4. (SBU) COMMUNITIES PITCHING IN: Villagers nearly everywhere add their own resources to supplement or build on UNICEF projects. Most UNICEF-assisted schools had certified government teachers who spoke Burmese; younger students spoke Shan or Pa-O, but little or no Burmese. Parents in most cases hired local, non-certified teachers (fluent in the vernacular) to augment the Ministry of Education provided faculty. At one school the community replaced the hand pump on a UNICEF-provided tube well with a diesel-powered pump to supply safe water to the entire community (see below). Local residents often assist government nurses and doctors at rural clinics, who make about \$5 and \$8 per month, with food and other in-kind support.

¶5. (C) BUT POOR GOVERNANCE UNDERMINES PROSPECTS: UNICEF is perhaps the most effective of the various UN agencies operating in Burma and has made notable progress in eradicating polio, iodizing salt, and providing vitamin A supplements to children. The diplomats on this trip personally administered oral polio immunizations and vitamin A supplements to scores of two-year olds at various UNICEF locations. Next month the GOB Ministry of Health is going to announce that wild polio has been eradicated in Burma.

-- However, just as an ebb tide lowers all boats, so too does poor governance in Burma harm overall levels of child welfare despite a few specific improvements brokered by UNICEF.

-- At the school with the diesel-powered water pump, the village has seen the price of diesel fuel quadruple since they bought the pump 16 months ago. Due to soaring fuel costs, the village can only afford to run the pump for an inadequate ten hours per month. The SPDC's economic mismanagement is causing inflation and other hardships for the country's rural poor (i.e., most Burmese).

-- In one Pa-O township the (ethnic Burman) health officials told us they could not access the southern third of the region readily, due to an uneasy relationship with the Pa-O National Organization, an ethnic rebel group that signed a cease-fire with the SPDC. An edgy truce is better than active combat, but the advent of a legitimate, representative administration would improve access to child welfare programs particularly in ethnic minority regions.

-- The Shan State Guest House in Taunggyi is a beautiful colonial-era structure. Situated a thousand feet above it on a cliff is a sprawling mansion called "Mount Pleasant." The group of diplomats, having just spent 3 days visiting bare

local clinics staffed by dedicated nurses making \$5 per month, discovered that Mount Pleasant is a new military guesthouse reserved for senior generals. Secretary I Khin Nyunt particularly favors it, we were told. Oddly, the guesthouse sports a large megalithic structure rather like Stonehenge in its front yard. Such SPDC resource allocations, i.e., building itself posh mountaintop retreats while 35% of the country's children are malnourished, according to UN figures, ought to give pause to international donors when asked by Burma for concessional aid.

16. (C) COMMENT: If UNICEF and its sister UN organizations were better funded and more flexible, they might be able to make marginal improvements in child welfare and other aspects of human development in this poor country. Absent a representative and accountable government, however, their efforts are likely to be minimized or undone by a military regime more intent on its own well-being than on that of the people of Burma. End Comment.

McMullen